Historic Preservation and the African American Community

A Measure of Commitment to Cultural Diversity

Patricia Wilson

As the decade of the 90s unfolds, cultural diversity has become a watchword of the historic preservation movement. In the span of a few short years a topic that was once held as the special interest of only a few is now being highlighted in the programs, publications and conferences of both public and private organizations, including the National Park Service (NPS), the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO), and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (Trust). The question remains, however, whether cultural diversity will be fully embraced as a guiding principle of the historic preservation movement, or whether it is a mere passing interest that will have little long-term impact.

If the historic preservation movement's interest in cultural diversity is to move beyond the trendiness of "politically correct" rhetoric, a commitment must be made to a broad range of policies, programs, and activities that would change the character of the movement in a profound manner. Preservationists must move beyond academic discussions of cultural diversity to true acts of inclusion. Only in this way will the tenets of cultural diversity become fully and tangibly infused in our efforts to identify, document and preserve resources reflective of our nation's diverse history. This article will review the traditional preservation community's response to one aspect of the question, preserving African American resources, in the hope that we might gain a better understanding of the issues and challenges ahead.

Federal and State Sponsored Activities

The development of federal and state-level programs and strategies to encourage the preservation of resources associated with the African American community may be viewed as critical benchmarks in the preservation movement's response to calls for cultural diversity. According to Antoinette J. Lee in her essay "Discovering Old Cultures in the New World: The Role of Ethnicity," in 1943 the George Washington Carver National Monument in Diamond, Missouri became the first property entered into the national park system primarily for its relationship to African American history. Since this early acquisition other Park Service initiatives have led to the registration and documentation of approximately 90 National Historic Landmarks associated with African American history.[1] Currently, NPS management of sites such as the Maggie Walker Historic Site in Richmond, VA not only help broaden our understanding of American history, but also serve as catalyst for neighborhood revitalization. These sites play a special role in building the public's appreciation of the diversity and richness of African American heritage while providing a local focus of community pride.

While the NPS has made a special effort to identify and properly interpret sites significant to the African American experience there is the realization that its commitment to cultural diversity must be reflected within the agency itself. Today, the NPS continues to face the chal-

*(**Wilson**—continued on page 22)*

This thoughtful and provocative essay by Patricia Wilson, Regional Director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Mid-Atlantic Region, was solicited by *CRM* to address the question of African American participation in the field of Historic Preservation. Specifically, African Americans are underrepresented in proportion to their presence in American history and culture both in terms of resources recognized and preserved, and of active participants in the preservation movement. The question is an important one for at least two reasons. First, it is simply right that African Americans, as members of our society and culture, should be fully involved in an aspect of American society that we (professionals, avocationals and interested parties in cultural resource management) believe to be important, rewarding, and fulfilling. It is a matter of inclusion to redress past exclusion. Second, it is important because America is changing. The complexity and complexion of America in a few decades will be as different from today's as today's is from that of the fledgling and developing nation. It is important that the disciplines and professions that comprise cultural resource management work to foster inclusion for all groups. Failure to do so may well mean that we will spend the future in isolation and irrelevance.

This article is offered in the hope of stimulating constructive dialogue toward the end of raising consciousness and designing solutions to promote the inclusion of all groups. To be sure, we have come a long way as a professional community. We have established mechanisms in law and practice that will allow this to happen. But, as Ms. Wilson points out, the previously excluded are not going to come running to us. It is up to us to reach out, to make all people aware of the opportunities for personal fulfillment and the enrichment of society that are among the finest goals of these pursuits, and not only to help them find ways of joining us, but to help us find ways of joining them. The best bridges work in two directions. Ms. Wilson's background as an African American and preservationist with deep experience with the grassroots preservation movement makes her well qualified to address this topic.

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(***Wilson***—*continued from page 21)*

lenge of developing culturally sensitive policies and programs, and hiring African American professionals. Programs targeting historically black colleges, such as the Historic American Buildings Survey courses taught at Hampton University, often serve as the first introduction to the historic preservation profession for African American students. This and other worthwhile efforts should serve as the foundation for future NPS initiatives to diversify the preservation profession as well as its programs.

Despite the Service's laudable record, the policies of state agencies and private organizations rarely reflect the same level of consistent commitment. The amount of activity varies greatly among state historic preservation offices, with those in the South taking the lead. Since Alabama established its Black Heritage Council in 1984, other states have also formed special review boards to encourage the identification of minority resources and help develop outreach programs. A few states, including California, Maryland, and Michigan, have made a solid commitment to the identification and documentation of significant African American sites by undertaking comprehensive surveys.

In 1988 the NCSHPO established a task force to examine the extent of minority participation in state historic preservation programs. Over the course of two years, with the support of a Critical Issues Fund Grant from the Trust, the task force conducted several panel discussions and workshops to gain the input of both professionals and interested lay persons. The task force also distributed a survey to measure the number of minorities holding staff positions in state historic preservation offices. The survey results revealed a glaring absence of minority professionals working in state preservation offices. The vast majority of state preservation offices had never had any minority employees. In those cases where minorities were employed, most were classified as secretarial/support staff. African Americans represented 65% of the identified minority employees.

In response to the survey results and recommendations from the discussions groups, the NCSHPO's task force established four primary goals to guide the cultural diversity initiatives of state historic preservation offices. These included setting up mechanisms, such as the Alabama Black Heritage Council, to bring minorities in the states into existing preservation networks; developing information-sharing mechanisms for the state historic preservation offices; developing public awareness activities and forums for African Americans; and planning and funding professional development programs. While not all state historic preservation offices have established the identification and preservation of African American resources as priorities, the work of the NCSHPO's task force established a clear road map for future endeavors.

Although activities of the NPS and the NCSHPO represent important progress in the effort to recognize African American resources and encourage greater participation of African Americans in the preservation movement, they remain exceptions rather than the rule. While the sensitivity of federal and state agencies to these concerns has certainly grown, concrete action is still needed. The findings of the NCSHPO underline the need for the development of on-going survey, outreach, and professional development strategies that will result in a sustained and fundamental change in state and federal preservation programs.

Private Sector Activities

The vast majority of historic sites are preserved due to the efforts of the grassroots preservation organizations. These private sector initiatives have been the catalyst for thousands of local historic district designations, historic site restorations, and the establishment of historic house museums that represent our historic patrimony. Unfortunately, private sector overtures to the African American community have been inconsistent and rarely coordinated. As a result, very few African Americans participate in the mainstream private preservation movement. However, recent developments both within and outside of the preservation movement have encouraged some progress.

New demographic and political realities, particularly in urban and southern communities, have recently made preservationists aware of the need to work with African American leaders and neighborhood representatives. City-wide preservation organizations, such as the District of Columbia Preservation League, have discovered that a diverse membership and broad programming are political imperatives. In a city in which African Americans comprise the majority of the population and where political leaders and agency representatives are often African American, preservationists could ill afford to remain aloof. Instead, a commitment to the preservation of all of the city's resources, black as well as white, had to be evidenced through the organization's leadership, membership and, most obviously, its programs. Surveys of historically African American neighborhoods undertaken in cooperation with traditional neighborhood organizations, documentation and designation of the works of early African American architects, and recruiting interns from the area's historically African American colleges all signal the League's commitment to including the African American community in the local preservation movement. Many more local organizations will face a similar challenge of making historic preservation more politically and socially relevant to a burgeoning and empowered African American population.

Unfortunately, few outreach initiatives have been launched by statewide non-profit preservation organizations. Again, those organizations in the south, such as the Georgia Trust and the Tennessee Heritage Alliance, have taken the lead by diversifying their boards, highlighting African American heritage during annual conferences, and creating new educational programs. The efforts of the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana (HLFI) represent an outstanding exception. In 1992, HLFI established its African American Landmarks Committee. This committee helps identify significant sites, develops educational programs and serves as an important link between Indiana's traditional preservation community and the African American community.

The Trust developed its first outreach programs in the early 1970s. At that time the organization made its first affirmative efforts to attract African Americans to its Board of Trustees and Board of Advisors. The Trust also co-sponsored the Conference on Historic Preservation and the Minority Community, a gathering held annually from 1972 to 1982. Working with African American preservation advocates, the Trust developed the conference as a forum to focus on specific issues related to the preservation of African American resources. At its high point the conference claimed over 150 registrants. Perhaps more importantly,the conference attracted and encouraged the participation of several of the African American community's first generation of preservation leaders.

Over the last 20 years the Trust has developed a variety of outreach and technical assistance programs to respond to the preservation needs of the African American community with varying degrees of success. Perhaps the Trust's most successful outreach program has been its conference scholarship program. With support from the Getty Grant Fund, the Trust developed its scholarship program to encourage the participation of African Americans and other ethnic groups in its annual conference. The program has brought more than 150 African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and other minorities to the Trust's 1992 and 93 annual conferences, literally changing the complexion of preservation's largest gathering. Yet despite its 20-year track record, the Trust still has few African American members and remains virtually unknown within the African American community.

The efforts of these private preservation organizations stand in stark contrast to the interests of the broader preservation community. The historic preservation movement is often still characterized as white and exclusive. Appreciation of the contributions of the African American community to American history and culture is still not part of the work-a-day world of the average preservationist. Special programs and initiatives such as those mentioned above are still required to encourage the consideration of African American resources. Further, few private preservation organizations can count African Americans among their board members or general membership. These conditions must be reversed if cultural diversity is to become an integral and sustained aspect of the private preservation movement.

Barriers to African American Participation

Today, few African Americans actively support preservation organizations or serve as volunteers. Fewer still are professionals in the field. An examination of the underlying reasons for the limited minority participation of the past may help identify strategies to generate greater participation in the future. In general, the African American community's lack of affiliation with preservation efforts has been dictated by the character of the traditional preservation movement, and by issues and conditions intrinsic to the African American community itself.

From its beginnings with the Mount Vernon Ladies Home Association in 1858, the historic preservation movement has celebrated those sites associated with the great figures and events in the country's political history. The preservation of landmarks such as Mt. Vernon and Independence Hall resulted from the urge to maintain America's colonial legacy. Later, preservationists expressed an interest in architecture as well as history. Here, too, the emphasis was given to resources dating from the colonial period, but the scope of interest quickly expanded to also include outstanding examples of high style architecture from more recent periods. Thus, from the early days of the movement to within relatively recent times, the resources most often preserved were those associated with great events, our heroes of democracy, and the graceful homes and churches of the high and mighty. Preservationists themselves were distinguished as members of the privileged wealthy class, with time and money to spend championing the preservation of old buildings to which they, the elite of their time, had deep, personal connections.

The image of preservation as the avocation of those who care more for buildings than for people persists. With its selective emphasis on high style architecture and grand events, preservation historically has had little to do with common people, especially those who are black. Thus, with little relevance to the African American experience, historic preservation brokered no interest from the African American community.

The lack of appreciation of African American history as an integral element of American history presents yet another obstacle to African American participation in the historic preservation movement. In the past, the persistently Euro-centric inclinations of traditional historians had given little credence to the influences African Americans might have had on the broad themes of American history. Just as African American history was relegated to a side-bar in the history books, the historic preservation movement rarely devoted critical attention to African American resources. In more than a few privately-held house museums, where amateur historians had romanticized and aggrandized the site's significance, a filtered view of history was favored over more accurate interpretations. For example, many African American resources were quietly obliterated as plantation homes were interpreted without reference to the slave economy that supported them, slaves were politely called servants, and other significant resources simply ignored. While most historic sites now offer more accurate interpretations, many African Americans recall these earlier sanitized interpretations and still associate them with the private historic preservation movement.

Like many causes, historic preservation has been supported by a growing social network that has generated the cadre of volunteers that fill the ranks of local organizations. Rarely do these volunteer networks cross racial lines. It is well documented that while the law mandates that the different races work together and attend school together, rarely do they live, worship or play together. Historic preservation has not escaped the segregated nature of our social networks. As noted above, traditional preservation organizations rarely reach out to African Americans for volunteer services,

*(**Wilson—**continued on page 24)*

(***Wilson***—*continued from page 23)*

except when politically expedient or when dealing with an African American resource. As a result, few local preservation organizations are able to maintain memberships that are reflective of the racial composition of their communities. When overtures are extended, many blacks decline, unwilling to be used as tokens or bear the pressures of being "the only one."

The few African Americans that have developed an interest in historic preservation often find their efforts to designate resources significant to their communities frustrated by the application of systems and techniques that cannot or will not accommodate variations more appropriate to the African American experience. Traditional documentation practices depend upon written and other tangible records, but the African American tradition is largely oral. Further, resources associated with the African American community are often of cultural or historical significance, rather than architectural. Although inroads have been made at the national level to encourage the recognition of such sites, many local review commissions remain apprehensive about designation of these resources. The NCSHPO task force noted this as a major frustration to efforts to designate local sites associated with the African American community. As mentioned above, the creation of special commissions such as Georgia's Minority Historic Preservation Committee and Alabama's Black Heritage Council will help encourage and support the identification and designation of resources associated with the African American community.

Yet the lack of African American participation in the historic preservation movement can not be placed solely at the feet of the established preservation community. Issues and conditions within the African American community have also served to limit participation. Perhaps most critical has been the community's preoccupation with more urgent social and political agendas. Issues associated with civil rights, poverty, and equal opportunity are certainly more compelling when weighed against the preservation of derelict buildings. However, programs that demonstrate that historic preservation can be a vehicle for empowerment and self-determination have broadened support within the African American community.

In Pittsburgh's Manchester neighborhood, historic district designation and the Community Reinvestment Act have served as viable tools for residents seeking greater control of their community. Together, these tools have also encouraged increased investment and home ownership in the community. Other African American communities, including Mount Auburn in Cincinnati, New York's Harlem, and LeMert Park in Los Angeles, have also come to support historic preservation because of its contribution to neighborhood revitalization.

Closely associated with preservation's perceived lack of social urgency is the relative lack of financial resources within the African American community to support traditional preservation efforts. Individually, few African Americans enjoy the luxury of leisure or wealth that has characterized the traditional preservation movement. Further, many of those who have recently become part of the middle-class find little cachet in owning older homes and may prefer new things as symbols of their upward mobility. Although this tendency is not exclusive to the African American community, it has contributed to the abandonment of both inner city neighborhoods and rural communities. The vast majority of middle to upper income African Americans are more likely to devote their resources to causes such as education and the prevention of drug abuse that address more urgent needs, than one that is often perceived as aesthetically self-indulgent.

Sadly, many African Americans still find it difficult to celebrate the past. Too often, the past offers only painful recollections of hardship brought on by dehumanizing enslavement, discrimination, and poverty. Generations of African Americans have been taught by white America that their culture offers little of value or beauty. Today, many in the black community still struggle to discard the last vestiges of the crippling self-hatred forced upon them by the dominant, white culture. Other African Americans react with hostility to the notion of preserving, let alone celebrating, resources associated with the oppressive white culture. "It is not my history!" is often exclaimed when an African American is asked to support a landmark designation. "Why should I help preserve a building that I could never go in!" is the retort given in the case of formerly segregated theaters, hotels, and department stores. African Americans must come to understand historic preservation as a constructive means of reminding both the oppressor and the oppressed of the true story.

A case in Ellisville, MS provides a vivid illustration of the controversy that may be generated by the preservation of some resources. When the Jones County courthouse was built, the words "white" and "colored" were incised above the water fountains. It is believed that these are the only extant signs that represent the institutionalized racism that characterized Mississippi's social and political systems from 1890 to 1964. Although there was an attempt to cover the signs with plaster, the signs were recognized by many in Ellisville as part of local history. Controversy erupted in 1989, when the local NAACP demanded their removal. In response, the Jones County Board of Supervisors decided to sandblast the signs. Because the building is a designated landmark, this action required the approval of the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The Board of Trustees determined that the signs should be preserved as important symbols of the Jim Crow era. Tension ran high as the town's black and white citizens struggled to determine the appropriate treatment of these painful reminders of Ellisville's segregated past. Finally, as a compromise, the historic signs were covered by plaques to explain their significance. This compromise provided comfort to members of both Ellisville's white and African American communities, but perhaps dulls the impact of an important lesson that children should learn and adults should not be allowed to forget.

The specter of gentrification has also alienated many African Americans from historic preservation efforts. As played out by the media, and exploited by anti-preservationists, historic preservation and gentrification are synonymous. The scenario commonly present-

ed is one in which middle-income whites "discover" a neighborhood and set about changing it under the banner of historic preservation. Instead of the multi-ethnic, mixed income neighborhood they claim to want, the preservationists impose their lifestyles and values on others, drive up property taxes and gradually displace poor families that called the neighborhood home for generations. Low-income blacks are most often victimized by this phenomenon. Because of gentrification, many blacks fear historic preservation, while others react angrily to any attempts to "take over the neighborhood."

In order to nurture greater participation from the African American community in the future, the preservation community must create a welcoming environment, free from gratuitous tokenism or the threat of displacement. The perceived relevance of historic preservation to the aspirations of the African American community must be heightened. On the other hand, the African American community must be ready to celebrate its unique place in America's history. Both groups must shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that the true story of American history is told. Together, the groups must identify strategies that will foster greater appreciation and participation. These strategies must encourage volunteerism, professional development, and institutional access. A dual approach is required whereby historic preservation is made more relevant to the African American community and a new constituency is nurtured.

The Future

Today, many African Americans still believe that the goal of historic preservation is to preserve those buildings associated with "rich, dead, white men." This perception must be reversed to assure the African American community that historic preservation is relevant to its needs and interests and, indeed, worthy of its support and participation. Historic preservation must be posed as a viable means of meeting critical community goals, such as neighborhood revitalization and building racial pride. Strategies must also be developed to encourage volunteer and professional participation. Collectively, these activities will help generate a stronger preservation ethic within the African American community and build a new preservation constituency.

It has become clear, almost painfully so, that it is often inappropriate and sometimes destructive for the white community to impose its preservation values upon African Americans and other minority groups. African Americans and others rightfully resent "outsiders" telling them about their history and telling them what they should consider significant. The preservation community has a responsibility to encourage greater involvement from these groups to ensure the proper interpretation and appreciation of resources. Further, demographic statistics indicate that those groups currently tagged as minorities will soon, in fact, comprise the majority of the country's population. Preservationists must broaden their constituency to remain a relevant force in the 21st century.

In turn, the African American community, as well as other minority groups, has a responsibility to itself to play an active role in the preservation process. The participation of African American volunteers and professionals and the development of African American preservation organizations such as Landmarks harlem will ensure a more aggressive and sensitive approach to the preservation of African American resources.

The ability to "tell your own story" is empowering. The preservation of significant African American resources will reaffirm, for whites as well as blacks, the race's positive contribution to American history. Finally, a better knowledge and use of landmark laws and other land-use regulations will help protect African American communities from encroachment and exploitation.

The success of the historic preservation movement's efforts to develop a broader preservation constituency in partnership with the African American community will serve as a measure of the movement's resolve to change in a meaningful way. Progress in policy and program development, community outreach, and professional development will provide important benchmarks in the effort to broaden the preservation movement to include those of color. Only then will the African American community and other people of color believe that the current overtures from the preservation community are signals of a strong, on-going commitment to an inclusive and culturally diverse preservation movement.

Note

[1] At present the NPS is engaged in two initiatives that will increase this number, the Underground Railroad Theme Study, and a congressionally-mandated continuation of the earlier African American Theme Study. —JH.

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